

Bird in Space c. 1941

Bronze, on two-part stone pedestal

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M.
Burden, 1964



Brancusi made his first *Bird in Space* in 1923, and continued to develop the theme in subsequent sculptures, like the *Bird in Space* on view in this gallery. The issue of originality became a central point of debate in the 1927 trial *Brancusi v. United States*. The case arose out of the artist's shipment of a 1926 bronze *Bird in Space* to New York for an exhibition. According to U.S. customs officials, the sculpture failed to satisfy this country's qualifications for a work of art. First of all, the sculpture did not literally resemble a bird, and, second, it appeared to be an industrially produced object. In 1928 the case was decided in the artist's favor, largely because of how the work was made and the fact that—unlike mass-produced goods—it was indeed singular.

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Brancusi
Sculpture
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Bird in Space 1928

Bronze

Given anonymously, 1934



In 1923, Brancusi refined the figure of the bird to its most concentrated form. The first *Bird in Space* was made from marble; bronze and plaster versions followed in the years and decades to come. Of the nine existing bronze versions of *Bird in Space*, no two are identical. In order to make each sculpture, Brancusi began by creating a plaster cast based on a marble version of the sculpture, manipulating the plaster to alter its proportions, and then casting the result in bronze. This ensured the uniqueness of each *Bird in Space*. “I never make reproductions,” Brancusi explained. Each sculpture is “a separate work made years apart. . . . And with this ‘bird in flight’ if I change one dimension an inch all the other proportions have to be changed, and it is the devil’s job to do it.” The two differently sized and shaped *Bird in Space* works on view here attest to Brancusi’s claim.

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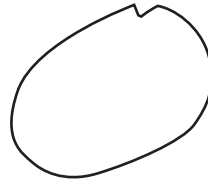
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The First Cry 1917

Bronze

Private collection



Brancusi cast this sculpture from the wooden *Head of a Child* (1914–15), a remnant of *The First Step* (1914), a full-body figure and the artist's earliest carved wooden work, which he later destroyed, saving only the head. *The First Cry* showcases Brancusi's concise yet deeply communicative formal vocabulary: a curved gash running down the length of the ovoid head defines the brow, eye, and nose, while the deeply arched indentation beneath reads as a mouth crying in distress.

Throughout the 1910s and '20s, Brancusi explored this economy of expression as he pushed his depictions of "heads" to the brink of abstraction.

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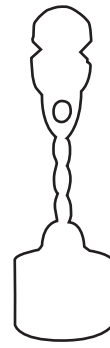
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Socrates 1922

Oak, on limestone cylinder

Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, 1956



Carved directly into oak, the large head, with cut-out eyes and mouth agape, is balanced atop the neck and shoulders, which are slender but nonetheless able to support the mass above. Brancusi said of *Socrates*, “Nothing escapes the great thinker. He knows all, he sees all, he hears all. His eyes are in his ears, his ears are in his eyes.” This work not only reveals Brancusi’s admiration for the Greek philosopher but also alludes to his friendship with composer Erik Satie, whose opera *Socrate* had been performed in Paris in 1920. In fact, Brancusi addressed Satie, ten years his senior, as Socrates, and Satie called him Plato. *Socrates* was the first wooden sculpture by Brancusi acquired by MoMA; Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the Museum’s founding director, doggedly pursued it for years before it entered the collection.

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Young Bird 1928

Bronze, on two-part pedestal
of limestone and oak

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M.
Burden, 1985



Brancusi often engaged with a particular motif time and again, producing multiple variants of a given subject, but *Young Bird* is an exception. Only two other *Young Bird* works exist, a 1925 marble on which Brancusi based this bronze and a larger marble made in 1929. The squat form of the bronze provides an interesting intermediary point between the attenuated *Bird in Space* and the ovoid and earthbound *First Cry*, both also on view in this gallery. *Young Bird* stands on an original pedestal designed by the artist for this sculpture, which comprises a limestone cube and an abstract cylindrically shaped wooden base, whose repetitive forms call to mind *Endless Column*.

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Mlle Pogany version I, 1913
Bronze with black patina, on
limestone base

Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss
Bequest (by exchange), 1953



This sculpture is a portrait of Margit Pogany, a Hungarian artist who sat for Brancusi several times in 1910 and 1911 while she was in Paris studying painting. Shortly after her return to Hungary, Brancusi carved a marble *Mlle Pogany* from memory, then made a plaster mold of the work, from which he cast four additional versions, including this one, in bronze. In representing its subject through highly stylized and simplified forms, the work was a significant departure from conventional portraiture. Large almond-shaped eyes overwhelm the oval face, and a black patina represents the hair that covers the top of the head and extends over the elaborate chignon at the nape of the neck. As with other motifs, this was a subject Brancusi would return to and rework in the years to come.

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The Cock 1924

Cherry

Gift of LeRay W. Berdeau, 1959



Brancusi carved this work, including the cylindrical base, from a single piece of wild cherry wood. Its simplified form suggests the serrated outline of the comb that crowns a rooster's head, its staccato repetition reminiscent of the geometry of the *Endless Column*, also on view here. While Brancusi would go on to create other, larger versions of *The Cock* and had ambitions to erect one at a monumental scale, he made only two versions in wood, and this is the only one that survives. *The Cock* held particular significance for Brancusi, who purportedly said time and again, “*Le Coq c’est moi*” (*The Cock is me*).

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Endless Column version I, 1918

Oak

Gift of Mary Sisler, 1983



This sculpture is the earliest extant *Endless Column*. In preceding years Brancusi had used a single or double pyramid as a base for his sculpture, but he eventually came to see this abstract construction as a fully realized work in its own right. Carved from oak, this succession of pyramids forms a rhythmic and undulating geometry that suggests the possibility of infinite expansion. Like other favorite motifs, this was one that Brancusi would return to over the course of his career. In the mid-1920s, he carved an *Endless Column* for his friend the photographer Edward Steichen that rose more than twenty-three feet. And in 1937 Brancusi erected a steel *Endless Column* in Tîrgu-Jiu, Romania, that soared more than ninety-eight feet into the air. That *Endless Column*, his last, was part of a larger sculptural ensemble that included *The Gate of the Kiss* and *Table of Silence*, which formed the artist's only foray into public sculpture.

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Maiastra 1910–12

White marble, on three-part limestone pedestal, of which the middle section is *Double Caryatid*, c. 1908

Katherine S. Dreier Bequest, 1953



Maiastra is Brancusi's first sculpture of a bird. Its title refers to a mythical creature from Romanian legend. Carved from white marble, the work's streamlined form accentuates the bird's elongated neck, swollen chest, and tail feathers, imparting a regal elegance commensurate with the subject on which it is based. *Maiastra* sits perched on a tall tripartite limestone base, the central component of which began as a freestanding sculpture of two figures bearing a stone on their heads, called *Double Caryatid*. (A caryatid is an architectural support typically carved in the form of a woman.) *Maiastra* marks the first time the artist incorporated an existing sculpture into a pedestal, a practice he would continue throughout his career.

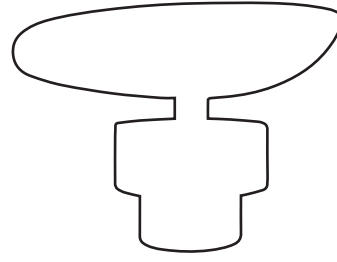
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Fish 1930

Blue-gray marble, on three-part pedestal of one marble and two limestone cylinders



Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange), 1948

This monumental elongated oval disk, the largest *Fish* Brancusi created, attests to Brancusi's deep interest in movement. Not only does its heavy body, made of flecked blue-gray marble, evoke aquatic motion, but, in fact, it rests on a pivot that once allowed the work to spin. Even when still, the work changes as one moves around it. Overwhelmingly horizontal, the marble transforms into an attenuated sliver from particular points of view.

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Blond Negress II 1933

Bronze, on four-part pedestal of marble, limestone, and two oak sections

The Philip L. Goodwin Collection, 1958



The polished bronze head of *Blond Negress II* sits at eye level atop a multipart base made of carved wood, limestone, and marble elements; it is the one work in the gallery that includes all four of Brancusi's most-used materials. The series to which the sculpture belongs was initiated in 1923 with a white marble version titled *White Negress I*, allegedly inspired by an African woman Brancusi saw at a colonial fair in Marseilles in 1922. Many artists working in Paris during the 1920s, including Pablo Picasso, borrowed heavily from non-Western art, particularly art from various regions in Africa. Like many of Brancusi's sculptures, *Blond Negress II* departs from the realism typical to most conventional Western sculpture of the period. Even so, this work is still a portrait, since it is based on a particular person, though a nameless one.

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View of the Artist's Studio 1918

Gouache and pencil on board

The Joan and Lester Avnet Collection, 1978

Brancusi made fewer than two hundred drawings, some of which depict his studio, a subject that also appeared frequently in his photographs. In both his photographs and drawings, Brancusi shows his works stacked and layered in space, as he would have seen them, attesting to his interest in the sculptures as individual, self-contained forms and as objects with variable relationships to one another. Here you can see the columnar form of *The Kiss* in the background and *Mlle Pogany* in the foreground, painted a vibrant yellow to indicate the polished bronze.

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